



# New College

Remarks at Commencement  
Dr. John Elmendorf, President  
June 15, 1968

## A LETTER TO NEW COLLEGE



*On my desk for several days has been a letter which was never sent. It is headed, "A letter to New College students," and it is dated June 5, 1968. I would like to read it to you.*

At seven o'clock this morning, Mrs. Elmen-dorf and I heard the news that someone had tried to kill Senator Kennedy. When the immediate nausea had passed, we began, as many must have done, to ponder once again the problems of violence. I would like to share with you some of our thoughts.

First, of course, we felt a deep sense of sorrow, a rather diffused form of sadness—cosmic, almost. We were troubled about society, about the depths of alienation which have engulfed our country, particularly our young people. Our

thoughts moved, as they will do, in a stream of consciousness, to racism, to poverty, to war; yet they returned again and again to affluence, to humanism, to education. We recalled Howard Mumford Jones' remark, "Ours is an age of brilliance, and violence," and we thought of the students of New College (our minds turn too often to New College, I suppose, to students in particular, because very few events in our daily lives are unrelated to this college). The frame of reference for our thoughts at this time was another in the tragic and dramatic series of violent deeds, especially poignant because of the earlier murder of President Kennedy and the sacrifice of Dr. King, a leader who had the confidence of both the others.

One thinks first: "There is no sense to all this—there is no reason, no cause, no meaning." Perhaps—and perhaps not. Perhaps we, our generation, have created the best incubator of violence the world has ever seen. Perhaps our concern for *things* we have has made us lose sight of the human beings we are supposed to be. Perhaps we have generated a society in which informal violence must prevail because



we depend for our national self-respect on demonstrating to the world our remarkable capacity for formal violence, which we call war.

We cannot understand violence in the streets, violence on the campus, violence in the ghettos. Perhaps, if we better understood violence in the jungles, violence in the villages and towns and rice paddies, we could better understand it at home. Professor William Hamilton commented in a recent article in the *New Mexico Quarterly*, "It is almost as if our protest is being forced to become more violent as the war itself becomes more violent." We elevate killing semantically to assassination, and thereby try to isolate one kind of killing from another. Having done so, we then express our outrage at assassins, and promptly forget the tens of thousands of young men we ourselves are training to kill, and the even greater numbers who live their lives with the expectation that they too will soon be learning to kill more efficiently.

Why, I ask, why is everyone so surprised? What is so strange about private violence, when public violence is not only condoned, but de-

manded? Must we not, in fact, expect private violence when the objective of the violent person is to get his own way in much the same way that the objective of public violence—war—is to attain the goals of the collectivity we call a nation?

Why do I write to you? Not, certainly, to make a plea for law and order, for that is the sham, the slogan solution. Order, as I have said before, derives from respect for others and law is the formal codification of expectations of a civilized society. Both law and order are secondary phenomena, however, and neither exists when men fail to respect the integrity of other men. The Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," is a law, long considered a good law, but when man decides that the law must be changed to read, "Thou shalt not kill, except . . . in which case you *must* kill," it becomes a travesty of law.

I write to urge you to try to understand violence, above all the causes of violence. You are free enough here at New College to range rather widely in your academic and intellectual

pursuits. Some of you decide to specialize rather narrowly in fields which may bear little relationship to the immediate problems of society. They may have attracted you precisely *because* they are discrete, self-contained, concerned with beauty, truth, order or with distant times and distant places. They may have been a refuge for you from the kind of reality which includes violence, as they long have been for intellectuals. The time is past—if indeed it ever was present—when intellectuals can ignore the rush of history. You are men and women as well as scholars. You will be fathers and mothers as well as scholars. You will be soldiers, too, some of you, and you will live violence. And you *must* understand it, confront it, examine it, and I hope, dedicate some part of yourself to ending it.

I will quote one more phrase from Howard Mumford Jones' brilliant essay entitled VIOLENCE AND THE HUMANIST: "The hurt that one feels about anarchy and evil would not be possible unless one had had, intellectually, prior to this sorrow, some apprehension of the nature of order, rationality, loveliness and calm." It is this that I believe you may have acquired here, and it is

this which is the source of whatever hope there may be. My nature, as some of you know, is to be hopeful, even optimistic. These are days to try that nature, and I guess I have written this letter more to reaffirm my own faith than to help you acquire yours. The faith is there, however, and it must be. If it is not, there is indeed no sense, no reason, no cause, no meaning to our lives. As an intellectual I find it impossible to believe that rational man cannot learn to find the reconciliation between mind, spirit and body, which can lead to love, joy, and peace in our time. I hope *you* may find it.



